

Madison man gives Santa a hand

'It's very important to help people who are not as fortunate as yourself'

Eight-year-old Latisha wants a bike, makeup and a Bratz doll.

Martinez, 9, asked for a bike, an action figure and a football.

And Destiny, 7, wants a toy laptop, a toy talking parrot and a princess comforter for her bed.

If it weren't for Madison resident Anthony Morrison, they might not get their wish. All could wake up Christmas morning devastated that Santa hadn't visited. They might even think they hadn't been good enough to make his list.

But Morrison didn't just buy Christmas gifts for Latisha, Destiny and Martinez this year; he took 24 Angels off The Salvation Army Angel Tree at Northpark mall - one for every year of his life.

It's becoming an annual tradition. Last year, after learning 23 angels had not been claimed the day before the tree was scheduled to be removed, Morrison spontaneously decided to take all that remained - 23.

He quickly organized an impromptu army of friends and family, who met him at the mall and helped track down the children's wishes, spending around \$2,500 in the process.

This year, his venture was a little more organized. He established a nonprofit organization and Web site called ChristmasForKids.us designed to encourage young people to become involved with the Angel Tree program and asked Toys R Us store managers to open early Sunday morning so his team of do-gooders could drop \$5,000 on Angel presents.

Some would say Morrison's just a kid himself, but at 24, good business judgment and innovative ideas have made him wealthy enough to afford Christmas gifts for 24 children.

The Madison-Ridgeland Academy graduate attended Mississippi College, graduating pre-med. He had planned to go to medical school, but after founding three Internet businesses that took off his senior year, he decided to focus on being an entrepreneur.

In addition to operating online financial marketing, automotive parts and advertising businesses, today Morrison tours the country conducting seminars about how to profit from the Internet.



Photos by Rick Guy/The Clarion-Ledger

Entrepreneur Anthony Morrison of Madison holds Angel cards of children he adopted by a stack of toys he purchased for The Salvation Army's Angel Tree program that gives toys to needy children for Christmas.

"My whole thing growing up was I never did a lot of partying," he says. "If I had extra time, I was trying to figure out how I could use it to make money.

"I focused my time on doing things that are productive and beneficial rather than wasting it on things that will get you in trouble. And once you have financially secured yourself, I think it's very important to help people who are not as fortunate as yourself."

According to Save the Children, the federal government has set the poverty level at \$19,350 for a family of four. Families receiving less than two times that, or \$38,700, cannot meet basic needs and are considered low-income.

The Web site reports that the basic needs of more than half of Mississippi's children (51 percent) are not met, and the U.S. Census Bureau says 29 percent live below the poverty level.

While Morrison's mother, Shelia, and her husband, Roger, (a retired real estate investor) grew up without the finer things of life, they were able to give their children practically anything they wanted. Anthony may not have had a silver spoon, but he had a silver glove autographed by Chicago Cubs player Ryan Sandberg that Shelia says is one of her son's most memorable Christmas presents.

But the Morrisons also made sure their children knew everyone wasn't as fortunate, and buying presents for an Angel has been a family tradition since Anthony was 3.

"I think Anthony really does see and understand the other side of that coin even though he's never had to live it," she says, "and I think that's the thing I'm most proud of him for, and my other children as well."

Chip Price, director of development for The Salvation Army, says people like Morrison help the Angel Tree program and Red Kettle Campaign continue.

Last year 5,418 clients were served during Christmas at the Metro Jackson Salvation Army, Price says. Toys were distributed to 3,604 children, 8,000 gifts were given at nursing homes and 547 gift boxes were delivered to needy people in the community.

You can generally find Angel Trees at malls and Wal-Marts throughout the state. Those who take Angels from the tree, return the gifts they purchase for them at the same location.

Laurel native Brian Regan, 21, has been involved with the Angel Tree program the past three years. This year, he created a Facebook group to encourage fellow college students to participate.

"Hopefully, there are a few out there who are going to do it," he says. "Even if 10 people do, that's 10 more children that can be touched."

This year, the University of Southern Mississippi accounting student bought gifts for two boys, 12 and 7, who wrote "anything" for their Angel card wish.

"I got the 12-year-old a pair of jeans, a jacket, a shirt, a handheld CD player, a CD and headphones," he says. "I got the 7-year-old jeans, a shirt, a jacket, some handheld games, a Spiderman game and a Nerf toy." He also plans to add Bibles.

"It was almost like shopping for a little brother," he says. "I don't have much money, but this is something that doesn't take much.

"I guess the thinking is that maybe a child will get toys for Christmas and also learn it's true meaning, which is the birth of our Savior."

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